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SUBJECT: FINLAND'S PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES SPAR OVER
SECURITY ISSUES

REF: HELSINKI 920

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: The unofficial opening rounds of Finland's presidential campaign appear to indicate that European and trans-Atlantic security issues could become central themes. Conservative Party candidate Niinisto has advocated that Finland embrace European security guarantee mechanisms and downplayed NATO membership, although his remarks may represent mere rhetoric designed to spark debate, and not deeply held views. Center Party presidential candidate (and PM) Vanhanen has emphasized that the U.S. remains crucial to European security, but has stopped short of advocating NATO membership for Finland. President Halonen -- whose status as incumbent and a lead of nearly 40 points in the polls have allowed her to remain largely above the fray -- has stated that Finland's current security posture requires no realignment. The views of outside commentators vary widely. However, most share our opinion that the major candidates' positions differ only slightly, and that any real action on security policy will emerge not from January's presidential election, but rather from the parliamentary election scheduled for March 2007. End Summary.

Niinisto's Working Vacation

[1](#)2. (U) Although Finland's presidential campaign does not begin officially until November, an unofficial "pre-campaign" appeared to begin in August and brought with it several notable exchanges on European and trans-Atlantic security issues. The early start to the political season was prompted in large part by Conservative Party (Cons) Candidate Sauli Niinisto, who used his two months of summer vacation from his current post as vice-president of the European Investment Bank in Luxemburg to return home, launch his campaign, and begin delineating how his platform will differ from his major rivals. In addition to being resident in Luxembourg, Niinisto is the only one of the three major-party candidates who does not currently hold elected office. This lack of a bully pulpit leaves him at a disadvantage vis-a-vis his two principle rivals, incumbent President Tarja Halonen, a Social Democrat (SDP), and Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen, the Center Party's presidential candidate.

[1](#)3. (SBU) According to his aides, Niinisto sought to open an early debate on security issues because he believed that neither Halonen nor Vanhanen was taking a leadership role. He has publicly advocated that Finland embrace the European security guarantees as outlined in the now-stalled EU Constitution Treaty. In addition, Niinisto has accused the Vanhanen government of a sort of flip-flop -- that is, first opposing the European guarantees, then embracing them when they became part of the EU Constitution Treaty, then once again abandoning them after the French and Dutch "non" votes. As for NATO, Niinisto has downplayed Finnish membership in public, recognizing that voters strongly favor maintaining Finland's traditional policy of nonalignment. When pressed in private, Niinisto remained noncommittal, even to the suggestion of European security guarantees possibly being a step toward NATO membership (see reftel). His stance puts him somewhat at odds with many others in the Conservative Party, which is not of one mind on NATO but historically has tended to favor Finland's membership. For example, the Conservative Party Chairman, Jyrki Katainen, has been a steady proponent of eventual Finnish accession. Indeed, many observers -- including some Conservatives -- contend that Niinisto's public views represent rhetoric designed to spark debate and distinguish himself from other candidates, rather than deeply held personal beliefs.

Vanhanen Responds

[1](#)4. (U) Candidate Vanhanen has responded publicly by emphasizing the importance of the United States to European security. In a recent speech to Center Party activists and Parliamentarians, Vanhanen highlighted the "historic commitment of North America" to European defense and said that Finland should do its part to "make sure that U.S. interest in Europe and its defense survives." He argued that seeking to turn the EU into a military alliance is "

not on the horizon" and that "no overlapping or competing security solutions should be built between Europe and the United States." The PM stopped short of advocating that Finland join NATO, but did note his government supported keeping "the option of NATO membership" open for discussion.

15. (SBU) Privately, Vanhanen's camp has been even more explicit. His chief of staff, Riisto Volanen, has repeatedly emphasized to us that, of the three major party candidates, Vanhanen is the strongest advocate of trans-Atlantic cooperation. Niinisto's recent public remarks on EU security cooperation demonstrated that Niinisto viewed European guarantees as more important for Finland than the trans-Atlantic relationship -- and perhaps even a substitute, Volanen added. He also said that he expected the issue to figure prominently in the campaign and, in fact, the PM has continued to reiterate the importance of trans-Atlantic ties at many of his public engagements. Nevertheless, even Volanen would not go so far as to suggest that NATO membership itself will become a campaign issue. NATO is a very touchy subject for Finnish voters, and Vanhanen -- who may have the most to lose politically should he fare poorly in the upcoming election -- cannot afford to lose votes over it. (Vanhanen currently trails Niinisto by two percentage points in recent polls.)

The President: A Safe Distance

16. (SBU) For the most part, President Halonen has appeared happy to allow her two main rivals to do most of the sparring on security issues. Halonen enjoys a tremendous lead in the polls -- a position of strength which has allowed her to weigh on issues when it suits her. (The most recent Finnish Gallup poll indicates that if elections were held now, Halonen would take 58 percent, enough for a first round win.) That said, some on the left have quietly expressed concerns that Halonen needs to become more vocal on security issues and that she cannot afford to allow Vanhanen and Niinisto to dictate the tenor of the discussion. Perhaps as a result, Halonen has recently begun advocating both continued progress on European security guarantees (despite the setbacks on the Constitution Treaty) and support for trans-Atlantic partnership in a series of characteristically positive public comments. Halonen -- like Vanhanen -- opposes NATO membership for Finland in the short term, but has not ruled it out as an eventual possibility. However, unlike the Prime Minister, Halonen sees the NATO discussion as largely theoretical and clearly favors non-alignment; Vanhanen, on the other hand, appears more inclined to believe that, at some point, Finland may actually join NATO. In any case, Halonen has sought to de-emphasize the issue altogether, emphasizing that "in our current external environment, nothing has happened that would call for any new decision" on Finland's overall security stance.

Other Comments

17. (SBU) The candidates' sparring has, of course, prompted a wide range of other commentators to weigh in on the security debate. Max Jakobson, a former senior diplomat and perhaps Finland's most respected foreign policy commentator, declared that "the EU cannot be relied on as a defense policy player" and that Finland must join NATO "before there is an emergency." (Unfortunately, Jakobson's pleas have fallen on deaf ears; only one candidate -- Henrik Lax, of the small Swedish Peoples Party -- openly advocates NATO membership.) Others have commented on how any changes in Finnish policy might affect relations with Russia, the EU or the U.S.; on whether Finland suffers a security "deficit" or a security "surplus;" and, of course, on the fact that, to most voters, the candidates' positions really differ very little from one another.

Our Comment

18. (SBU) It is valid to question whether or not the candidates' positions are ultimately all that different in the eyes of a Finnish electorate that still jealously defends the notion of Finnish nonalignment and opposes NATO membership by an 80 to 20 percent margin. For U.S. observers, the more important question might be whether any candidate, once in office, can muster the political momentum necessary to effect a real change in Finnish security policy. All acknowledge that the right leader with the right message might be able to sell the Finns on NATO membership, yet ironies abound: Halonen, who will likely win, would no doubt prefer that NATO membership remain an academic discussion for the six years of her second term. However, influential figures within her SDP party (including former PM Paavo Lipponen) are beginning to quietly suggest that NATO membership must be put on the table sooner rather than later. Niinisto's Conservative

party is the most inclined of the big three to support NATO membership, but the candidate himself has de-emphasized NATO in favor of European security guarantees. And Vanhanen, the most open to NATO, faces his own Center party, the bulk of which is steadfastly against Finland's joining NATO. In the end, any major security policy changes will depend more on what type of coalition enters government after the March 2007 parliamentary election -- and on whether the new prime minister and the president elected this January together can provide the right leadership and the right message to counter public skepticism.

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